



# Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

January 2018

*A Happy New Year  
to all our readers!*

This newsletter returns to familiar themes about balancing the needs of visitors, residents and local businesses. At the time of writing your editor had recently returned from a holiday in New Zealand where some of the same concerns are felt.

## **More Light!**

Those were reportedly Goethe's dying words in 1832. He might have been tempted to make the same exclamation if he had been in the Old Town over Christmas 2017. A year ago we commented on how in 2016 the festive lights around our area were patchy and varying in quality. With some notable exceptions things were even worse in 2017. From the Lawnmarket eastwards the Royal Mile was devoid of decoration apart from a peculiar canopy of lights in front of the City Chambers, a trussed-up Christmas tree to the west of St Giles and a patchily illuminated tree to its east. Further down the hill there was nothing until the illuminated trees at the Canongate Kirk and then a final flourish at the Queen's Gallery with a suitably regal golden swag above the entrance. Cockburn Street had the same tired decorations as last year, possibly with still more dead bulbs. Some traders in the Grassmarket made an effort but the overall effect here would have been much improved with better lighting of the central trees. The two shining exceptions to this generally dismal picture were Castle Hill and Victoria Street. In both areas traders illuminated their premises imaginatively and the overall effect was enhanced, in the case of Castle Hill, by floodlighting of the Castle and the Hub; and in Victoria Street by much improved overhead decorations.

These examples show what can be achieved and the evening atmosphere in these streets was noticeably buzzier than elsewhere around the Old Town, suggesting that good festive lighting is good for business. Let's hope we see more of it next Christmas. Sadly, the City Council seem to have missed an opportunity to harvest windfall funds which could have been used for such lighting or other community projects. For some weeks in 2017 filming for the Hollywood blockbuster *The Avengers* took place in the Old Town. Prompted by the Association one of our Councillors, Jo Mowat, asked the Council what income this had generated for them. The answer eventually extracted from the Council was "there are no specific payments to the City for filming in Edinburgh but the Council does charge for road closures and the use of Council facilities for filming". No figures were given for charges for road closures or use of Council facilities in 2017. Councillor Mowat has said she will pursue this matter further and also seek to establish what other councils charge film companies. Watch this space...

## Alexander McCall Smith Speaks Out

The best-selling author has again voiced his concern at development trends in Edinburgh. Writing for *The Edinburgh Reporter*, an online newspaper, he urged the City Council to control tourism or risk the city becoming a “vulgar wasteland of tourist tat shops, big hotels and nothing much else ... We need to ban the hanging of tartan merchandise out on the pavement. Pavements are not meant to be obstructed, so why is the law not being enforced?” McCall Smith says his aim is to stop the erosion of community, particularly in the Old Town: “A reasonable balance of use is the important thing for a thriving community. You can very quickly end up like Venice. The Venetians are desperate to escape the consequence of their city becoming a kind of Disneyland”.

Adam Wilkinson, the Director of Edinburgh World Heritage, expresses similar views, saying that the future prosperity of the city would “partly depend on embracing a more sustainable approach to tourism growth”. That meant “balancing the needs of visitors with residents and local businesses”. The City Council and industry bodies should embrace these principles in planning for the future.

The reported response from Gordon Robertson, chairman of Marketing Edinburgh, is “Our strategy has to be for the Edinburgh of the future – not the past”. That could mean anything or nothing. An intelligent strategy for the Edinburgh of the future would take proper account of the concerns expressed by McCall Smith and others. It should not involve a blind and supine embracing of tourism growth at any cost.

## Familiar Edinburgh sights?

A saltire fluttering in the breeze, some well-kent street names, a tartan tat shop, a bus heading down Princes Street to Corstorphine. But look more closely and some questions arise. Has the City Council started using



a new style of street signs? Surely the 33 bus goes to Baberton not Corstorphine? And since when did the ANZ Bank have a branch on the corner of Hanover Street and George Street?



In fact these photographs were not taken in Edinburgh but 11,000 miles away in Dunedin, in Otago on the South Island of New Zealand. Dunedin was established in 1848 by a group of Scottish Free Church men with a vision to establish a new Edinburgh on the other side of the world where “piety, rectitude and industry” could flourish. The Otago Emigration Office, based at 20 St Andrew’s Square, Edinburgh, gave helpful advice to prospective settlers including the size of mattress they needed to bring for the three month voyage: for men six feet by 20 inches; for women five feet nine inches by 18 inches; for married couples six feet by three feet; and for children “according to size”.



For just over a decade Dunedin grew slowly in accordance with the founders’ original vision. Then gold was discovered in its Otago hinterland and the infant city received a vast influx of new settlers: industrious in their own way but hardly noted for piety and rectitude. But for all that the city has proudly maintained its Scottish identity with a statue of Robbie Burns in the main square (wearing a traffic cone hat on the day your editor arrived there), pipe bands and Highland dancing, and transplanted Edinburgh place names, even down to a stream called the Water of Leith.



## A Wider New Zealand Perspective

Tourism is very important to the New Zealand economy but there, as in Edinburgh, there are concerns about some of the ways in which it is developing. In Christchurch, still recovering from its devastating earthquake in 2011, some of the many new and reopened hotels struggled with low occupancy levels over the winter while recently released statistics showed that a fifth of accommodation bookings in the city were made through Airbnb. A tourism industry spokesman commented “We recognise sites like Airbnb give consumers a wider choice, but they are not regulated in the way commercial accommodation providers are. There are not the same safety standards for fire and health and safety. Are they paying their share of taxes and rates?” Queenstown, probably the New Zealand community most heavily dependent on tourism, proposes that Airbnb homes rented for more than a set number of weeks will need to obtain consents. Auckland, the largest city, where nearly a third of bookings are made through Airbnb, is considering widening a tax levied on hotels to Airbnb properties.

We are pleased that the adverse impact of holiday lets on city centres such as the Old Town of Edinburgh has been recognised and that there are initiatives proposed to control unregulated short-term lets in Scotland.

## Pipe Down!

We have frequently mentioned the constant nuisance of another unregulated activity: busking. Although there are guidelines, these were not advertised and buskers plied their trade with impunity. We were pleased therefore to see the following signs appearing:



Inelegant and in no way enhancing our public open spaces, but no busker can now claim ignorance of the rules!

## A Turning Tide?



While holiday lets and busking seem to be unrelenting, perhaps there is a glimmer of hope concerning the proliferation of eateries. In recent months, the Bay of Bengal Restaurant and the Rabbie Burns Café have reverted to retail:



They are shops again, albeit aimed at visitors. Perhaps they or others will in due course become shops catering for residents, even if we have to wait for short-term lets to revert to housing.

## Portrait Gift



A portrait of Anna Morton has been donated to the Patrick Geddes Centre in Riddle's Court. Anna Morton (Mrs Patrick Geddes) is shown sitting in a flat in Princes Street with the Old Town skyline in the background. The

date of the painting (1886) is the year before Anna Morton moved with her husband to James' Court. Come and hear more about the painting (now undergoing conservation) at our AGM.

## Events and Happenings

The next major temporary exhibition at the **Museum of Scotland** in Chambers Street will be the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* starting on 19 January and running until 29 April. The museum says that "this immersive and atmospheric display of 100 awe-inspiring images presents the incredible diversity and fragility of life on Earth in a new and spectacular way". Entry charges apply. At the same museum running until 25 February (and free) is *Scotland's Early Silver* which tells the fascinating story of how Roman pieces were hacked up, melted down and repeatedly recycled before ending up as iconic items like the Hunterston Brooch.

There are currently four free exhibitions at the **City Arts Centre** in Market Street: *A Fine Line* which runs until 18 February; *Playfair and the City* which runs until 25 February; *Songs for Winter* which runs until 4 March; and *Hidden Gems* which runs until 13 May. *A Fine Line* features work by four contemporary artists based in Scotland - Lizzie Farey, Angie Lewin, Frances Priest and Bronwen Sleigh. The architect William Henry Playfair (1790-1857) made contributions to the architecture of early 19th century Edinburgh which can be found throughout the city and its environs. The current exhibition focuses on his built and unbuilt proposals within the City Centre, demonstrating his vision and ambition for the city. *Songs for Winter* celebrates the work of two artists, Charles Poulsen and Pauline Burbidge, based in the Scottish Borders. Finally, *Hidden Gems* turns the spotlight onto lesser-known treasures from the City Arts Centre permanent collection, bringing many artworks into public view for the first time in decades.

The **National Library of Scotland** exhibition *The International Style of Muriel Spark*, to 13 May 2018, takes us on a journey to the locations Muriel called home – from Edinburgh to Africa, London, New York, Rome and Tuscany – using archive material and personal artefacts. For other talks and events at the National Library see [www.nls.uk/events](http://www.nls.uk/events). **Dovecot Studio:** *Daughters of Penelope*, to 20 January 2018, *Magical Transformations*, to 17 March 2018, a series of pieces charting the apprenticeship of Ben Hymers, and *Voyage*, to 7 May 2018, showcasing a new Garry Fabian Miller tapestry created in collaboration with Dovecot Tapestry Studio.

The current exhibition at the **Queen's Gallery** at the Palace of Holyrood House (running until 22 April) is *Splendours of the Subcontinent: a Prince's Tour of India 1875-6*. In October 1875 the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII) set off on a four-month tour of the Indian Subcontinent. The exhibition tells the story of this grand tour through Indian treasures from the Royal Collection that were presented to the Prince during his visit. Entry charges apply – but your ticket gives you unlimited access to the Queen's Gallery for one year when you get it stamped after your visit.

**The Old Edinburgh Club's** winter programme of talks, 7pm at the Augustine United Church, 41 George IV Bridge, Edinburgh, EH1 1EL, open to non-members (£5.00).

Wednesday 17th January 2018: Professor Richard Rodger, *Mapping Edinburgh's Social History*.

Wednesday 14th February: Dr Lance Whitehead & Dr Jenny Nex, *The Trafficking of Musical Instruments in Georgian and Victorian Edinburgh*.

Wednesday 14th March: Ann Glen, *The Waverley Route: Death and Revival*.

For talks and events at the **Edinburgh Central Library** see [www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/Edinburgh-reads-1650684470](http://www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/Edinburgh-reads-1650684470).

## OTA Activities

**A Road Well-Travelled.** Wednesday 24 January, 7.00 p.m., Quaker Meeting House, Victoria Terrace. In this illustrated talk Sheila Szatkowski, historian and author of *A Guide to Enlightenment Edinburgh*, reflects on the many high (and some low) points of leading walks in Old Town Edinburgh over the last 35 years. Tickets £5, guests welcome.

**Greyfriars Kirkyard.** Monday 26 February, 7.00 p.m. Robert Howie of Historic Edinburgh Tours will lead us on a night-time guided tour of Greyfriars Kirkyard with projected images to illustrate the history of the cemetery and the lives of those buried there. The tour will involve steps and standing around. Tickets £6 (includes a donation to the StreetWork charity). Numbers limited, **members only**.

**Annual General Meeting and Talk on Anna Morton by Russell Clegg.** Wednesday 7 March, 6.30 p.m., Geddes Room, Riddle's Court, 322 Lawnmarket. Members' chance to quiz the Association's committee about what they have been doing over the last year. The meeting will be followed by a talk by Russell Clegg, Learning Officer for the Scottish Redundant Buildings Trust, on the recently acquired portrait of Anna Morton (Mrs Patrick Geddes). No cost, but please let us know if you want to come so we know how many chairs to set out. Guests welcome.

**Call for Nominations.** The Committee of the Old Town Association meets monthly and is businesslike and friendly. One can get a good idea of the wide range of topics covered if you are a regular reader of the Newsletter. We can always do with new committee members; if you are interested in all aspects of life and work in the Old Town, please get in touch with us on [info@eota.org.uk](mailto:info@eota.org.uk) or by post. Contact us also if you would like an advance copy of the annual accounts or a copy of the Association's constitution.

**Edinburgh on Film.** Thursday 15 March, 7.00 p.m., Quaker Meeting House, Victoria Terrace. Talk by Rosie Ellison of Edinburgh Film who will explain how our city has been, and is now increasingly, used as a location for many films and TV dramas. Tickets £5 (includes a donation to Cash for Kids, Forth Radio's local kids' charity). Guests welcome.

### **When we say members only, we mean it!**

Please do not ask for tickets for friends or partners unless they are also members.

## How to Book Tickets

The Old Town Association has accounts with Eventbrite and PayPal so you may book and pay for tickets on-line instead of by post. Your options are:

- **Apply by post** as before using the enclosed ticket form. The address for ticket applications and subscriptions is: 8 Abbeyhill Crescent, Edinburgh EH8 8DZ. Please remember to send a stamped addressed envelope for your tickets!
- **On-line.** Book tickets using Eventbrite (<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/edinburgh-old-town-association-12448508825>). You will be sent an e-ticket but there is no need to print this out, just give your name at the door. Pay on-line either using Eventbrite (there is a transaction charge) or using the OTA PayPal account (click the Donate button link at [www.eota.org.uk/index.php/what-we-do/join-us](http://www.eota.org.uk/index.php/what-we-do/join-us)).

You may also use PayPal to pay your subscription (you will have been sent a reminder if it is due!), but do remember to include a message with your payment or send us an email (also to [info@eota.org.uk](mailto:info@eota.org.uk)) so we know what your payment is for!